

[Great Lakes Sailors]

Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

No. Words 990

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Jerome W. Power

ADDRESS 70 8 West 76th Street

DATE April 25, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore - Great Lakes Sailors

1. Date and time of interview -

April 25, 1939 - 4:00 P. M.

2. Place of interview -

Home of Fred Smith, who, when in port, lives with his sister at 8502 Muskegon Avenue, South Chicago.

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3. Name and address of informant -

Fred Smith, 8 502 Muskegon Avenue, South Chicago.

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant -

Ralph Rogers, general organizer, National [Maritime?] Union, 92nd Street and Baltimore Avenue, South Chicago.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you -

None

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. -

A neat, well maintained frame house, two stories, with a spacious back yard. Interview in dining room. Furnishings about average middle class American. Nautical trophies on walls. Mr. Smith's young nieces - two girls about 17 years old, in courteous but quiet attendance, to bring tobacco, matches, sharpen lead pencils and dig up old note-books to refresh informant's memory.

FORM B Personal History of Informant

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Jerome W. Power

Library of Congress

ADDRESS 708 West 76th Street

DATE April 25, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore - Great Lakes Sailors

NAME OF INFORMANT Fred Smith

1. Ancestry - British

2. Place and date of birth -

Iona, Michigan - 1885

3. Family -

Bachelor

4. Places lived in, with dates -

Every port in the world, from 1900 to date.

5. Education, with dates -

Elementary

6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates -

Seaman

7. Special skills and interests -

None

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8. Community and religious activities -

Roman Catholic

9. Description of informant - A rather slight but well built man of 52 years. Broad shoulders. Rolling walk. Cleanly cut, bronzed features. Cheerful disposition. Talkative. Speaks good English with no accent. Less than usual profanity and blasphemy in his speech.

10. Other Points gained in interview -

Although this informant never went beyond the fourth grade in school, he shows the education of the average high school graduate. This feature is common with Great Lakes sailors, showing value of travel as an educator.

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

CHICAGO FOLKSTUFF

FOLKLORE

CHICAGO

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Jerome W. Power

ADDRESS 708 West 76th Street

DATE April 25, 1939

SUBJECT Folklore - Great Lakes Sailors

NAME OF INFORMANT Fred Smith A Rough Initiation

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Jack [Mc Nellis?] is now captain of the P-[?] fleet which has South Chicago as the home port. I have a vivid memory of how he was initiated as a wheel man many years ago. We were in Duluth, about Thanksgiving time, when we both shipped as part of the crew to take a yacht through the lakes to Brooklyn, New York. The name of the yacht was the "Salt Lake City". She had what is known as an open bridge, that is, the man at the wheel had no protection against the weather. Jack had experience as a wheel man and thought he was pretty good, too. The skipper assigned him to the wheel, which was all right with Jack, since that work pays more money than an ordinary A. B. He forgot to figure on the weather, however, on Lake Superior, at that late season. Cold rain, snow, sleet like bullets and plenty of fog was the daily dish. Poor Jack was so frozen when he came off duty that he could barely get the ice out of his system before it was time to take the wheel again. We kidded him a lot but I am quite certain he would have died rather than funk on the job. He stuck and we brought the yacht to Brooklyn without more than the usual difficulty of navigation on the lakes at this advanced time of the year.

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Jack and I are great friends and when we meet these days always talk about this trip, taken when we were both young sailors. Call of the Fresh Water

When I was thirteen years old, I ran away from my home in South Chicago to become a fresh water sailor. I knew I was too young to get a man's berth on one of the big boats, so I stowed away on the "Wings of St. Joe", a small sailing vessel which plied between Benton Harbor, Michigan and South Chicago. She brought in fruit and vegetables from Michigan and returned with poultry. I remained hidden until we were well out into the lake and then introduced myself to Captain Gettner. That gentleman laughed when he heard my story and expressed wonder that any lad, with a good home on shore, should wish to become a sailor. Five miles from St. Joe we were struck by a savage gale and wrecked on a sand bar. The shore, however, was only a stone's throw distant. The skipper grabbed me under his arm and struggled through the breakers to safety. We had a lot of chickens and ducks

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on board, which escaped from the crates when the storm smashed them. The ducks swam ashore but the chickens all drowned. No human lives were lost and the U. S. Coast Guard went out after the storm had passed to float our vessel off the sand bar and bring it into port. Off Whitefish Point

Off Whitefish Point, in Lake Superior, I had an adventure once which shows the danger of heavy snow on that most treacherous of the 3 lakes. When darkness fell on the "Vulcan", which was my ship, a heavy snow storm, with a high wind, was raging. Our skipper, following the southern shore, decided to go between a small rocky island and the main land, about forty miles distant. He set his course - correctly, as he thought - but there was a cross wind and as we were without a cargo the ship rode high in the water. All night we kept looking for the island, which should have appeared to starboard, or on the right hand. We did not see the island, but with the dawn our lookout made out the Canadian shore. Our skipper took bearings and found that the wind, during the darkness, had drifted us far out into the lake. Instead of passing the inland on the lee side, close to the shore, we had gone on the other side. The skipper turned very white when he had determined our position. We could have piled up on the island. His Master's Voice

Sailors, I believe, are born and not made. I took to the boats when I was thirteen years old and have reached the age of fifty-two without being able to leave them, although I have tried several times. On the Great Lakes navigation stops during the winter, on account of the ice. During the winter of 1911, therefore, I worked in the Illinois Steel Co., in South Chicago. By spring I was running an overhead crane, which is a good, well-paid job. I was making more money than I could make on a boat, several times over. Perhaps I would have stuck, but one morning I heard a big freighter cut loose with her whistle down in the river. I got to thinking, with the 4 result that I asked for my time at the mill and in a few days was once more on a boat, with a good old rolling deck under my feet. The Sitting High Jump

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I can't prove what I say and have no evidence to support me, but I tell you that I saw the record for the sitting high jump broken all to hell. It was at the start of the World War. I was wheelman on a lake boat at the time, but I quit in Duluth and enlisted with the Canadians. We left Halifax in a transport bound for England - about 5,000 of us. We were not many miles at sea and I was down below, talking with members of the crew who were off watch. One of them was a huge negro oiler, who was bewailing the fact that he had ever left the southern cotton plantation on which he was born. He sat on a stool right across from me. Suddenly there came a shock as if an enormous club had walloped the ship in the side. That colored man went straight up into the air off his stool, a distance of several feet. He let out a yell and rushed for the ladder. The club landed again and he fell backwards off the ladder. We all made the deck promptly enough, to find that a German submarine was among those present. She had fired two torpedoes into us. We were in a sinking condition, but were able to beach ourselves between a couple large rocks, which are numerous along that shore. This was before the time of convoys, but destroyers soon came to chase the submarine and all of us were taken off the transport, after a few hours, without any loss of life.